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Nils William Olsson retired from the State Department in 1967 after a seventeen-year career as a diplomat. Ten years later, in 1977, leading political figures including Vice President Walter Mondale believed he would be a good choice for Ambassador to Sweden. "But," Olsson recalled recently, "it was not to be."[1]

United States relations with Sweden had been severely strained by the Vietnam War, which Swedes opposed, and at one point the U.S. withdrew its ambassador for an extended period. Appointment of Olsson, well known and liked in Sweden, might have done much to ease tensions. Newly elected presidents with ambassadors to name, however, are more likely to choose a political ally than a career diplomat or person with exceptional knowledge of a country. Jimmy Carter in 1977 was no exception. Rather than name someone with special skills in dealing with the Swedes, Carter selected an early campaign supporter.

A behind-the-scenes campaign to name Olsson had been initiated by a Washington reporter, Lee Egerstrom, of the *St. Paul Dispatch.* Egerstrom knew Olsson from Minneapolis and felt he was especially well qualified to be the U.S. ambassador. His credentials included not only State Department experience in Iceland, Sweden, and Norway, but seven years living in Sweden as a child, two years in Stockholm as an intelligence officer during World War II, and a Ph.D. and teaching experience in Scandinavian languages at the University of Chicago.

Egerstrom's campaign won the support of Mondale and Minnesota's two senators, former Vice President Hubert Humphrey and former Governor Wendell Anderson. Humphrey called Olsson "an exceptional individual with an outstanding career." But by April, newspapers here and in Sweden were reporting the choice would be a Carter ally. Egerstrom's story in the *Dispatch,*

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[1] Nils William Olsson (hereafter NWO), letter to author, 14 August 1998.

spread across eight columns, was headlined "Envoy to Sweden may not be Mondale, HHH choice."[2]

Sweden, 1915-1922

Nils William Olsson's knowledge of Sweden began as a six-year-old in 1915, when his widower father brought the family—Nils William, his younger brother Karl, and two sisters[3]—to live in Skåne with their grandparents while he went on to a post in Russia with the Pacific Car and Foundry Company of Renton, Washington. In Russia, the father met and married a Swedish (now Evangelical) Covenant missionary, and the family was reunited there briefly, until events preceding the Russian revolution forced the children and their stepmother to return to Sweden. They lived in Örebro and then Skåne again before leaving for the United States in 1922.[4]

The years of their residency in Sweden were years of world war and economic hardship. The first two years of World War I, 1914-16, had been times of prosperity in Sweden. Prevailing public sentiment, beginning with King Gustav V, was pro-German, and "having relatives in America was a negative."[5] Some even advocated entering the war on Germany's side. But in 1917 food became scarce and after the worst harvest since the 1860s, conditions rapidly deteriorated. Even potatoes were rationed, and Olsson recalls subsisting in Skåne on rutabagas. He also remembers being taunted by classmates with the nickname *"Amerikansk fläsk,"* a reference to rancid canned pork shipped from the United States.[6]

Nils William was thirteen when he returned to America. Despite two long periods in Skåne, he came back speaking the middle Swedish of Närke province and Örebro, described as a "somewhat unlovely dialect" with a "light nasal quality."[7] He completed his early education in Pittsburgh and in 1929 left for Chicago to enroll at North Park College, where he met his wife, Dagmar Gavert.

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[2] *St. Paul Dispatch*, 2 April 1977.

[3] The Olsson children were born in Seattle, Washington.

[4] Carl Philip Anderson, "Karl A. Olsson: A Sketch of His Life," in *Amicus Dei: Essays on Faith and Friendship, Presented to Karl A. Olsson on his 75th birthday*, ed. Philip J. Anderson (Chicago: Covenant Publications, 1988).

[5] Unless otherwise indicated, this and subsequent quotations and recollections are from Nils William Olsson, tape-recorded interview with author, 14 November 1998.

[6] For more on Sweden during World War I, see T. K. Derry, *A History of Scandinavia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979), 303-9, and Franklin D. Scott, *Sweden: The Nation's History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 468-75.

[7] Wilhelm Odelberg, "Some Thoughts on NWO on the Occasion of His Seventy-Fifth Birthday," in "An Ancient Folk in a New Land: Essays in Honor of Nils William Olsson," ed. H. Arnold Barton, *Swedish-American Historical Quarterly* 35 (1984): 195-6.

Stockholm, 1943-1945

Olsson was a thirty-three-year-old Ph.D. student and assistant in the Department of Germanics at the University of Chicago in 1942 when he was called to active duty in World War II as a lieutenant (junior grade) in the Naval Reserve. Because of his fluency in Swedish, he was assigned to the American embassy in Stockholm where he served as an assistant naval attaché until 1945, when he was released from active duty as a lieutenant commander and returned to the University of Chicago as an instructor.

Olsson left St. Andrew's Air Force Base in Scotland for Stockholm in January 1943, crossing the North Sea in a blacked-out plane. When the plane reached the Swedish border, the lights went on and the pilot announced, "We're over Sweden." Because Stockholm was fogged in, they landed at Torslanda airport in Göteborg, which hadn't seen a foreign plane in two years. As the passengers stepped from the plane, in parachutes and life jackets, they were met by a hastily assembled group of Swedish Home Guards, ready to repel an invasion.

Stockholm in 1943, like Lisbon, was a center of intrigue. It was "an exciting city. Everything was going on. All the Allies and the Germans had offices." But there was little or no contact between the two. Restaurants frequented by Germans, like Ringbogen on Strandvägen, were off limits to Americans. Henry Hanson, third secretary and vice consul at the embassy from 1942-44, like Olsson, uses the word exciting in describing what it was like:

> For an American, life in Stockholm during the war was interesting and exciting. We were always aware that we were living in a small, neutral country practically surrounded by Germans and threatened by German aggression.[8] Thousands of Swedish reserves had been mobilized. Soldiers were everywhere, as were convoys of trucks, tanks, and artillery. Thousands of others belonged to the Home Guard, graying men too old for active service who guarded bridges and defense plants, and the Lotta Corps, women who served in the military in many capacities and thereby relieved men for service in combat units.
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> Food was strictly rationed and, while adequate, was short on fats, so even diplomats lost weight. Gasoline was reserved for the defense forces,

[8] In the fall of 1942, with 25 panzer divisions and 400,000 German troops in Norway, Hitler proposed to strike across central Sweden to Stockholm in the spring and occupy the capital. A German military estimate reckoned that, although the people were 80 to 90 percent pro-Allies, the Swedish officer corps was 70 percent pro-German and the commanding general, Olof Thörnell, both pro-German and defeatist, making a quick surrender possible. Events elsewhere, however, compelled the Germans to withdraw troops from Norway to other fronts. - Scott, *Sweden: The Nation's History,* 507-8.

private autos were banned, and taxies and buses were equipped with charcoal burners for fuel. People relied on bicycles for transportation. Coal was imported, but was reserved for industry. Consequently, apartments and houses were heated with wood, and long tiers of wood lined the streets. Hot water was limited to the Saturday night bath.[9]

Trained in intelligence duties, Olsson had the job of interviewing Norwegian and Danish refugees and reporting any information they could provide about the location of German ships and submarines. This information was flown to England and transmitted for bombing runs. Dag Strömbäck, under whom he had studied at the University of Chicago, introduced him to his brother, Helge, head of the Swedish Navy. Olsson had dinner with him and at one point was invited to go on maneuvers with the Swedish fleet. But his superior, whom he suspected of jealousy, turned down the idea.

Swedish public opinion, unlike during World War I, was overwhelmingly pro-Allied Powers. Following the invasion and occupation of Denmark and Norway, threat to Sweden itself, and increasing reports of Nazi atrocities, the old favoritism toward Germany had all but disappeared. In the election of 21 September 1942, Nazi candidates fared badly. The German defeat at Stalingrad weeks after Olsson's arrival in 1943 persuaded the Swedes that Germany would lose the war, and finally the government terminated the agreement it had made early in the war permitting German troop transit across Sweden.[10]

When the war ended in 1945, Olsson returned to the U.S. and his studies at the University of Chicago, where his choice of Icelandic as a field of study would prove to be prophetic. After a year out organizing the Swedish Pioneer Centennial celebration of 1948, of which he was executive director, he received his Ph.D. in 1949 with a dissertation on the late medieval Icelandic saga, *Vidutan.*

Iceland, 1950-1952

He was an assistant professor at the University of Chicago in 1950 when he received a telephone call from Marshal W. S. Swan, whom he had gotten to know during the Swedish Pioneer Centennial celebration. Swan, who had joined the U.S. Information Service in Washington, said the man in charge of

[9] Henry Hanson, Fairfax, VA, letter to author, 21 October 1998.

[10] For more on Sweden during World War II, see Derry, *History of Scandinavia,* 328-55; Scott, *Sweden: The Nation's History,* 503-9; Alexander Klein, *The Counterfeit Traitor* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1958), 10, 19; and Peter Young, ed., *The World Almanac of World War* II (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1981). *Traitor* also was a 1962 film starring William Holden.

operations in Iceland had resigned in mid-term and wondered if Olsson was interested in replacing him. He was, and asked for a year's leave of absence from the University of Chicago. After a year he liked it so well he did not apply for an extension of the leave and went on to what was to be a seventeen-year career with the State Department.

The Olssons' introduction to their first assignment was not auspicious. They were in New York to board the *Gripsholm* for Gothenburg and from there go on to Reykjavik by way of Copenhagen. Nils William went in one cab full of baggage and his wife, Dagmar, went in another with the children. As they drove down 57th Street toward the pier, Dagmar's driver asked where she was going. When she answered Iceland, he braked, turned around and said, "You don't mean Iceland! I spent two years there and it was awful." This attitude was still prevalent during the Olssons' stay. "We had [bored] servicemen at Keflavik who made strings of 365 paper clips and each day would remove one to mark time," Nils William recalls.

For the Olssons, however, Iceland was a positive experience. "I think Iceland was the number one spot [of the three where they served], because we had come out of civilian life and a paltry sum of $280 a month to keep a family of five going, where we were forced to work extra to keep the ship afloat, and suddenly we had income twice that, with time to spend together as a family." As the plane circled the field, when they left two years later, "I looked at Dagmar and tears were streaming down her face."

The Olssons found the Icelanders "fine people, outgoing and friendly." But there was strong resentment, led by the Communist party, at the continued military presence of the Americans, whose withdrawal had been demanded immediately on conclusion of the war. Nils William's job as public affairs officer was to counter anti-U.S. sentiment through a program of student exchanges and American films and music. It also was to work with the American military in an effort to avoid any incidents. He recalls one instance in 1951 when Iceland was getting ready to observe the anniversary of its independence and the military public affairs officer suggested bringing in a destroyer to fire a salute. "I had all I could do to discourage him. [Can you imagine] what it would have been like to have a foreign frigate sail into the harbor and shoot off a salvo?"[11]

[11] For more on Iceland, see Derry, *History of Scandinavia*, 384.

Stockholm, 1952-1957

In 1952 the public affairs officer in Stockholm resigned suddenly and Olsson was sent there to replace him, forfeiting his vacation and going directly. Wilhelm Odelberg, in a 1984 article, summed up this phase of his friend's career:

> I assume that Nils William is regarded by his compatriots in the United States as a full-blooded American. In Sweden, it is hard not to think of him as thoroughly Swedish, despite the slightest, scarcely perceptible accent.... From 1952 to 1957, Nils William was public affairs officer and first secretary at the American Embassy in Stockholm. He was well familiar with the city and with Sweden as a whole. He was able easily to renew contacts with friends from earlier sojourns. Numerous new friends who shared his biographical and genealogical interests gathered at his and his wife Dagmar's hospitable home....
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> [His] principal task was to create contacts with contemporary Sweden. He moved with unfailing assurance at all levels of Swedish society and became a well-known figure at all occasions of an economic or cultural nature from Haparanda in the north to Ystad in the south.... Before he left, he was honored at a celebration on 30 January 1957 at the illustrious old restaurant, Gillet, in Stockholm, where he received a special testimonial of esteem from his Swedish friends. There is nothing wrong nowadays with cultural relations between the United States and Sweden, to be sure, but they have never been quite the same since Nils William left.[12]

On his return to the U.S., Olsson spent five years in Washington, first as public affairs adviser in the State Department's Scandinavian section, then as chief of aid to American-sponsored schools abroad. During this period, he resumed a leading role in the Swedish-American (then Swedish Pioneer) Historical Society, which he had helped bring into being in 1948. He initiated a flight program in 1960 and more than doubled membership before he left for another overseas assignment.

Norway, 1962-1966

In 1962 the Olssons packed their bags again and were off for Oslo, where Nils William served for four years, initially as embassy first secretary, then counselor for political affairs. "If I had to pick a country where we felt most at home, it would have to be Norway," he said last year. "The pace was slower, the

[12] Odelberg, "Some Thoughts on NWO," 196.

people were warm and immediate and enjoyed life. They would take a walk in the mountains rather than go shop. Entertaining was simple. In Sweden, you couldn't entertain unless you had a big dinner. When we came to Norway, it was simple—*aftens* [supper], with a few shrimp, a glass of wine, a piece of cheese. That was all you needed to have a good time."

Indiana University, 1966-1967

Olsson's last posting was as a visiting professor (diplomat in residence) at Indiana University in Bloomington during 1966-67. The Vietnam War was on and he was never really accepted by the faculty and students, who were largely opposed to the war. At the end of the year, he took early retirement from the State Department to get out from the burden of having to justify the war, which he privately opposed. ("I couldn't tell a lie [any longer].") It was in Bloomington that he completed work on his monumental *Swedish Passenger Arrivals in New York, 1820-1850,* which was published in 1967 by the Swedish Pioneer Historical Society.

Minneapolis, 1967-1973

Two years after leaving the State Department he was recognized by the Vasa Order in Sweden as its 1969 "Swedish-American of the Year." He was executive director of the American Swedish Institute in Minneapolis from 1967 until 1973, when he organized and became executive director of Swedish Council of America, the position he held when his name was advanced for ambassador. Despite the impressive support of Mondale, Humphrey, and Anderson, however, his name was not on the final list of five sent to Carter by the State Department. "The chap who brought home the bacon" was Rodney Kennedy-Minott, a University of California at Hayward professor of humanities who had befriended Carter in the early days of Carter's quest for the presidency. As a reward he was "given Stockholm, though he had asked for Copenhagen."

Kennedy-Minott served without distinction and returned home before the end of his term. In 1981 President Ronald Reagan nominated Franklin Forsberg, a Swedish-American publishing executive whose performance earned praise and the Vasa Order's designation as "Swedish-American of the Year" in 1986.